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The Big Red Blob

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As we embark upon the worthy task of internationalizing the campus, it would be well to ask not only how students become interested in the world beyond West Michigan and America, but also in what context we intend to nurture that interest. Are we really ready to encourage the disinterested pursuit of the truth about the outer world? Before you readily answer "yes," allow me to partially describe my own experience.

Like so many still alive in this most violent of centuries, I am a child of war, and my internationalization began early, as a consequence of that tremendous conflict which was being fought to a conclusion fifty years ago today. My first years in Denver were lived right beneath the flight paths of mighty squadrons dispatched East and West to do battle in the farthest regions of the earth. Although deep in the center of the North American continent, I never came under hostile fire—I had to become a university professor before I was treated to that experience—a big bomber crashed near my house and nearly terminated little Edward right then and there. I greatly admired my uncles who served in both theaters of war, and, small as I was, I vividly recall the celebrations of the first VE and VJ days.

Like most of my generation, my first exposure to modern world history was in the classrooms of teachers who, perforce, had strong views of the recent conflict and its meaning. I was particularly horrified by the accounts of what we now call the Holocaust. This loathing was intensified many years later when I was a member of a graduate seminar which worked with unpublished evidence gathered for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal. I developed a great and justifiable fear of the totalitarian state. I was much more afraid of totalitarianism than of atomic destruction.

Nuclear warfare, however, was a fear directly related to totalitarianism, because the threat of it came out of a far away country called Russia. Young Americans of my day were vividly aware of this threat: indeed, my classmates and I in rural Nebraska were part of a program in which we were taught the silhouettes of Soviet bombers and sent out after school to scan the skies with binoculars; we got lots of practice on the warplanes of the Strategic Air Command at Omaha. Later on, our landscape contained many deep missile silos—so aptly named, when one considers their rustic locations. Naturally we heard mention of the Communist threat as exemplified by the institutions of Stalin's Russia. I will never forget the terror that gripped my heart on the day when I innocently asked my sixth-grade teacher the name of that big red blob disfiguring the world map in our classroom, and she answered with a single word: "Russia."

By the time I reached the university, however, it was no longer fashionable in learned circles to discuss the Communist threat. McCarthyism left real spiritual scars on American learning. My high school teacher would not even teach Russian
geography or pronounce the name “Marx,” or tell us anything at all about what communism was. We used to torment him by asking, because of the obvious discomfort which our impertinence engendered. My university professor had nearly been tarred and feathered by an ignorant mob which broke into the campus buildings solely on the rumor that someone in there was “teaching about Russia”; he escaped when they seized a hapless mathematician who had had the bad luck to be his namesake. It was surely one of the greatest historical ironies that by discrediting the noble cause of anti-Communism, Senator McCarthy made anti-anti-Communism the prevailing orthodoxy in American universities, thus helping to prepare the way for the great leftward turn in our institutions of higher learning. I got to experience the latter first hand when I went on to doctoral studies in Russian history at Berkeley in the mid-1960s. Looking back on it all, I never cease to be amazed at the way in which history conspired to frustrate what was, admittedly, a morbid curiosity about Soviet Communist totalitarianism. My grade school teachers knew little about it. My high school teachers avoided the subject. And at the university, it became the kiss of death even to admit to such an interest. Then, as a result of all that is contained in the word “Vietnam,” it became “politically incorrect” even to inquire into its real nature.

Great doubt and insecurity tormented academic historians in the 1970s, especially those who had just emerged from the embattled campuses of the previous decade. The circumstances of the age profoundly transformed the university and delivered it into the hands of the advocates of “relevancy” and “accountability,” concepts which threatened the pursuit of truth in unexpected ways. Academics placed themselves under the rule of the “second censorship,” to use a Russian term, which is much more effective than the ordinary kind in preventing certain ideas and memories from emerging into consciousness. This unwholesome restriction on thought tightened its grip on us all, long before the expression “political correctness” emerged from who knows where, to give it a name.

In the early 1970s I found myself here at Grand Valley, charged with the responsibility of teaching Russian history at the undergraduate level, and I must confess that I plunged right in and immersed myself to the eyeballs in the filth of Soviet history. Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* burst upon the scene, and I remember devouring it, all three massive volumes of it, with tremendous intensity, and underlining passages with such violence that the pencil tore the paper! Though liberating, this study was not a pleasant experience, and it took me right back to my disturbed memories of the seminar on the Nuremberg documents.

I actually found that there was a plenitude of information about the human cost of Soviet Communism, which made me wonder why I had never run across any seminars on Soviet crimes against humanity. I am sure that somewhere they existed, but in a decade and a half in two of our finest public universities, I had never come across any. On the other hand, so much had been written and said and studied concerning the sordid and horrifying record of National Socialism that professors of German history faced a quite different problem: how to sustain interest in a
But all about what a professor had nearly been done to death. The problem becomes most obvious once one steps out of the Russian history classroom into the halls of general education, wherein lurk the Western civilization surveys. Then (as now) the available textbooks and readers heavily stressed German savageries, but gave only a nod in the direction of Russia's enormous crimes.

Therefore I think that this is an apt time to accelerate the cause of internationalization. Not only the Cold War is over, but also the long tyranny over our intellectual life which began in the 1950s. As evidence I point to the fact that there is no longer any political reason why our students cannot be told the truth about Russia and Russian Communism. Let's keep it that way, not only for Russia, but for the whole world out there.